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ABSTRACT

Accrediting agencies for colleges and universities across the United States emphasize training in oral communication skills as central to an undergraduate education. The problem or challenge is for communication faculty to develop programs in oral communication skills where students learn necessary skills and receive helpful assessment of these skills throughout their undergraduate educational careers. There is no agreement, however, among communication educators about what skills or communication contexts should be included in the basic communication course. Various studies have identified top skills which college graduates should have, and they may be grouped into four, sometimes overlapping, areas: listening skills, interpersonal communication skills, group communication skills, and strategies for being a competent communicator. Although public speaking skills are not specifically identified in any research study, the most popular basic communication education course is public speaking. The current hybrid basic communication course introduces students to specific communication competencies and the strategies needed to be a competent communicator. A new "blend" course (focusing on group and interpersonal communication) would give students multiple opportunities to demonstrate mastery of oral communication competencies in the aforementioned top skills. (Contains 26 references.) (NKA)

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Beyond Personal Preferences: Toward a Common Basic Communication Course

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Introduction

Accrediting agencies for colleges and universities across the United States emphasize training in oral communication skills as central to an undergraduate education. The North Central Association of Colleges and Schools articulates a clear position regarding the importance of communication in a student's undergraduate education; concluding, "If a general education program is based on cognitive experiences, it will typically describe its program in terms of college-level experience that engender such competencies as: capabilities in reading, writing, speaking, and listening" (p. 21). The emphasis in speaking and listening by North Central provides clear guidance regarding the types of communication skills undergraduate students need. Simply stated, students need to learn to speak competently and listen effectively in a variety of communication situations.

The *Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges* (1994) guidelines stated, "General education introduces students to the content and methodology of the major areas of knowledge -- the humanities, the fine arts, the natural sciences -- and helps them to develop the mental skills that will make them more effective learners. ... Programs of study ... must contain a recognizable body of instruction in program-related areas of 1) communication, 2) computation, and 3) human relationships" (p. 57). The Northwest Association's focus on communication skills and skills in human relations provide additional import to the inclusion of communication skills training in general education.

The other three accrediting agencies reiterate the emphasis on communication skill training in a student's undergraduate education. The *New England Association of Schools and Colleges* (1992) indicated that, "Graduates successfully completing an undergraduate program demonstrate competence in written and oral communication in English" (p. 12). The *Southern Association of Colleges and Schools* (1992) concluded, "Within this core [of general education courses], or in addition to it, the institution must provide components designed to ensure competence in reading, writing, oral communication and fundamental mathematical skills" (p. 24). Finally, the *Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools* (1994) pointed out, "Programs and courses which develop general intellectual skills such as the ability to form independent judgment, to weigh values, to understand fundamental theory, and to interact effectively in a culturally diverse world" (p. 4).

This emphasis on communication skills is central to all college and university accrediting agencies in the United States. The emphasis on oral communication skill development by each accrediting agency highlights an important problem facing basic course directors and communication educators of beginning communication programs. Our focus on how students may be trained in communication in pursuit of education is germane and timely. The problem or challenge is for communication faculty to develop programs in oral communication skills where students learn

necessary skills and receive helpful assessment of these skills throughout their undergraduate educational careers.

Interestingly, the notion that beginning communication courses, those founded on the principles of teaching applicable communication skills, should be broad in nature and not too context specific in scope is not new. Over thirty years ago, Dedmon (1965) wrote, "Our traditional approaches have blinded us to the real objective of the required first [basic] course: To teach a general education course in oral communication" (p. 125). We might suggest here that communication instruction in the beginning communication course has been blinded by a rich tradition of teaching public speaking skills that current research does not substantiate.

The research literature about communication skill training is substantial and consistent. Studies have repeatedly found that "giving information to and making decisions with another person" (interpersonal communication) and "providing information to and working in groups" (group communication) are the most important communication skills for undergraduate students to learn prior to graduation. A focus on oral communication skills *training* is generally recognized to be central to any general education program. However, two questions emerge:

- What oral communication skills should be included in training undergraduate students?

- Is what we teach in our basic communication courses consistent with what we know from the literature?

The communication discipline's focus on how students may be trained in communication in pursuit of education is germane and timely. There is no agreement on this issue among communication educators about what skills or communication contexts ought to be included in the basic communication course. There is little leadership from the National Communication Association guiding instruction in any specific direction regarding the mission of or content in the basic communication course. Seiler and McGukin (1989) concluded, "No agreement could be reached as to what the basic course is or what course best represents it!" (p. 29).

Specific Skills

The National Center for Educational Statistics (1994), in a report issued by the U.S. Department of Education, summarized a set of seven communication competencies for communication skills development. These included:

- situational appropriateness
- appropriate involvement and responsiveness
- adaptability and flexibility in communication with others
- clarity in communicating with others
- efficiency of communication
- goal accomplishment (pp. 132-133).

In a DELPHI study reported by Hugenberg, Robinson and Owens (1983), employers and communication educators were asked to identify vital communication skills for college graduates. The top seven skills were:

- giving clear directions
- listening well
- listening to what the other person is really saying and feeling
- establishing and maintaining open lines of communication with others
- articulating accurately your position
- collecting information before drawing conclusions
- selecting the proper way to communicate a message to others (pp. 1-8)

These results have been corroborated by the College Placement Service whose 1993 study revealed that in addition to one's proficiency in a field of study, employers most highly value *oral communication and interpersonal skills* (3). Curtis, Windsor and Stephens (1989) identified the top skills which young people need to become managers. Their survey of over one thousand personnel managers isolated these communication skills:

- work well with others one-on-one
- gather accurate information from others to make a decision
- work well in small groups

- listen effectively
- and give effective feedback

The importance of good interpersonal and group communication skills for job applicants is reported in studies prepared by business organizations, communication scholars, and the United States Government.

In another attempt to identify competencies needed by college graduates, Career Services at Bowling Green State University identified the following categories of competencies:

- Planning and Organizational Skills
- Oral and Written Communication Skills
- Decision-Making, Supervisory, Management and/or Leadership Skills
- Financial Management Skills
- Critical Thinking, Problem-Solving and Conflict Resolution Skills
- Teamwork and Team-building Skills
- Ethics and Tolerance Skills
- Personal and Professional Management Skills
- Transferable Skills (Information Management Skills, Design and Planning Skills, Research and Investigation Skills, Human Relations and Interpersonal Skills, Critical Thinking Skills, Management and Administration Skills, Valuing Skills, Personal and Career Development Skills)

In addition to the obvious category, one can easily identify the needed communication skills for the college graduate woven throughout the fabric of this listing. For example, there are specific and necessary communication skills needed for personal and professional management or human relations and that for one to be an effective manager and administrator, they need effective communication skills.

Collectively these studies and reports suggest that the communication skills which undergraduate students need to learn may be grouped into four, sometimes overlapping, areas:

Listening Skills

- listen well
- listen effectively
- establishing and maintaining open lines of communication with others
- listening to what the other person is really saying and feeling
- involvement and responsiveness
- gather accurate information from others to make a decision
- give effective feedback

Interpersonal Communication Skills

- establish and maintain open lines of communication
- communicate both upward and downward competently in an organization
- give effective feedback
- involvement and responsiveness
- goal accomplishment
- work well with others, one-on-one
- give effective feedback
- give clear directions

Group Communication Skills

- establish and maintain open lines of communication
- give clear directions
- involvement and responsiveness
- adaptability and flexibility
- work well with others, one-on-one
- collecting information before making a decision
- work well in small groups
- give effective feedback

Strategies for Being A Competent Communicator

- articulate accurately your position
- select the proper way to communicate a message
- situational appropriateness
- involvement and responsiveness

- adaptability and flexibility
- communication efficiency
- identifying a logical format for organizing and presenting information to others
- goal accomplishment

The problem in the relationship between the competencies identified in research and the competencies taught in 55% of the basic communication courses across the United States is in the area of public speaking (Morreale, et al., 1999, p. 10). Public speaking skills are not specifically identified in any of these research studies. Yet, the most popular basic communication course type is public speaking -- the second is the current hybrid course which includes public speaking (Morreale, et al., 1999, p. 10). The importance of teaching basic communication skills beyond public speaking is reiterated by each regional college and university accrediting agencies (Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, New England Association of Colleges and Schools, North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges, and Southern Association of Colleges and Schools). Pearson and Nelson (1990) articulated this issue best when they stated, "Because so many people inside and outside the discipline tell the basic course what it should be, it has become rather resistant to change and in many ways anachronistic. Like so many university

courses, it is designed to meet the need of yesterday, not today, and certainly not tomorrow" (pp. 4-5).

Student Competencies

By further reviewing the literature and available instructional materials, communication faculty should be able to identify specific oral communication skills to be included in the basic communication course. *These skills, as discovered in the research above, center around interpersonal and group communication situations.* These skills are within the normal teaching purview of communication faculty and graduate teaching assistants (GTAs); they are discrete and lend themselves to progress and outcome-based assessment; and they can be explained to non-communication instructors so as to enable faculty to monitor whether and how students in upper-level courses continue to use them, or not.

Listening

- Students can overcome barriers to effective listening
- Students can perform cognitive listening skills
- Students can perform expressive listening skills
- Students can perform transactional listening skills

Interpersonal Communication

- Students can communicate specific levels of trust in their interpersonal communication
- Students understand the appropriate use power in their interpersonal communication
- Students can self-disclose appropriately
- Students understand the role of attraction in their interpersonal relationships
- Students know the skills and strategies for initiating effective interpersonal relationships with others
- Students know the skills and strategies for maintaining effective interpersonal relationships
- Students know the skills and strategies for terminating interpersonal relationships
- Students can exhibit the skills and strategies for conflict management

Group Communication

- Students can demonstrate appropriate leadership skills in a group
- Students can evidence appropriate member roles in a group
- Students can demonstrate a variety of decision-making strategies
- Students can participate in constructive conflict resolution

- Students can express their ideas clearly to the group
- Students listen to all group members

Strategic Communication Skills

- Students can manage the communication context competently
- Students can use the strategies of persuasive communication competently.
- Students can use nonverbal communication appropriate to her or his message and the situation
- Students use appropriate strategies to help listeners understand the verbal and nonverbal messages
- Students use appropriate strategies to help listeners remember her or his message
- Students use appropriate verbal communication strategies to accomplish the goals of communication

Communication Skill Training: Examining the Myths

A commonly-held myth on many campuses needs to be dispelled: we "naturally" communicate well with others and in groups through speaking and hearing. This commonly-held but false belief takes root because people start talking with each other and in groups almost before they start walking: hence, one may think that effective interpersonal and group communication through talking with others is "easier" than walking, certainly easier than writing. It is not.

Second, there is no physical artifact of the oral/aural communication process. Oral communication and listening are effervescent; and, while harder to do well (in the absence of written correspondence), one's impression is the contrary. Said differently, written communication seems more difficult to do well because the message is available for public examination and reflective study. What one writes is designated, engineered, created, edited, and documented. What one says, though, must be arrived at in the mind.

It is not difficult to find a corresponding flaw in the suggestion that to improve a person's interpersonal and group communication competence, one simply needs to be encouraged to "do it more," to engage in more interpersonal and group communication-type activities. That flaw is that practice in the absence of instruction tends to produce not competence, but well-practiced incompetence. In other words, practicing the wrong skills is just that, practicing the wrong skills.

The Foundation: A Different Kind of Communication Blend Course

To set the stage for the ongoing communication skill development in undergraduate students, the basic communication course must establish the foundation. Seiler (1993), a national authority on communication education, wrote, "Because of the diversified nature and multi-plural society we are living in, the hybrid course has the flexibility and structure to adapt to

change better than any of the other introductory speech communication courses" (p. 52). The current hybrid basic communication course introduces students to specific communication competencies in interpersonal communication, listening, group communication, public speaking, and the strategies needed to be a competent communicator. The current hybrid course sets the all-important communication academic and skill foundation for students to develop their interpersonal and group communication skills; the ones identified by professionals and alumni -- plus public speaking.

Many faculty, administrators, and basic course directors understand the inherent and added value of including different and multiple communication contexts in the beginning course in communication skill development. Pearson and West (1991) stated, "The hybrid course may vary from campus to campus. ... Nonetheless, the large number of popular texts which creatively combine several communication contexts suggest that the hybrid course is fairly homogenous" (p. 17). Others, too, understand and recognize the value of the current hybrid course for basic communication skill development. Trank and Lewis (1991) concluded, "The blend or combination course is a popular option across all types of institutions and is reported as the most popular approach in the MA granting institutions" (p. 108). Teaching communication skills in the interpersonal, group, interviewing, public speaking, and other communication contexts seemed a good starting point for students taking only one

communication course. However, what research suggests that even this combination of communication contexts is appropriate for communication instruction in the basic course. This approach is as unsubstantiated as focusing on just public speaking, group, or interpersonal communication skills in the basic course. Research suggests students need specific communication skill development in two communication contexts -- interpersonal and group.

The ability for students to learn competent communication skills to help them in diverse situations should be one of the central goals of every basic communication course. The difficulty arises from our inability to identify and agree upon specific communication skills for undergraduate students in the body of communication research and scholarship. This is clearly evidenced in basic course programs across the country when some programs emphasize public speaking, others emphasize the hybrid communication course, some focus on interpersonal communication, others teach communication theory, some basic course programs integrate both writing and speaking skills, while still others use their basic communication course program to teach rhetorical theory with little communication skill training (Gibson, et al., 1970; Gibson, et al., 1974; Gibson, et al., 1980; Gibson, et al., 1985; Gibson, et al., 1990; Morreale, et al., 1999).

The inability of communication educators to define these essential communication competencies contributes to an identity for the basic communication course. The necessity of identifying and then teaching appropriate communication competencies to

students is the central role for faculty interested in beginning communication education. Shamefully, faculty frequently rely on their own views of what communication skills should be taught undergraduates, with little regard to existing results in the literature. Although faculty views need to be incorporated into any basic course program, results of research exist, or can be completed, to guide the selection of specific skills needed by undergraduate students before graduation.

Logical questions from any faculty, administrator, or student on any campus is, "What skills should undergraduate students learn in the basic course?" *and* "How were these skills identified?" How these questions are answered has implications for basic courses, a student's education, faculty instructional strategies, and assessment of communication competence to meet accrediting agency demands. The only logical way to respond to these questions is to refer back to the research findings regarding communication skills needed by undergraduate students and the message is clear -- interpersonal communication skills and group communication skills.

The course best suited to establish the foundations of communication competence for undergraduate students is a revised hybrid course -- a new communication blend course. This course might be described in college and university catalogs as: *An introduction to the theories and practice of interpersonal and group communication. Special emphasis on developing interpersonal and group communication skills.*

With the current hybrid course remaining the second most popular option for basic communication course programs around the country, those of us interested in the hybrid course are ready to increase program interest and student demand by developing a more refined and substantiated focus. Pearson and West (1991) reported, "A survey of college students and alumni found that, regardless of the nature of the introductory course experienced, both students and alumni believed the hybrid course to be most appropriate" (p. 28).

Students will be expected to achieve competence in each of the objectives listed above. In this new blend course, students have multiple opportunities to demonstrate mastery of oral communication competencies in listening, interpersonal communication, group communication, and successful communication strategies identified as needing enhancement.

Discussion

It seems reasonable to develop a beginning communication course that develops communication skills that meet the needs of students as they enter their careers. This course is the new blend communication course because it teaches students the foundations of interpersonal communication, group communication, and listening skills. The diversity of skills in a prospective employee is clearly the agenda reported by employers. Communication educators should rise to the challenge and offer

these skills in the one communication course most students take during their undergraduate studies.

It is not sufficient to suggest that the public speaking skills we teach in the basic communication course translate to other communication contexts. Bendtschneider and Trank (1990) agreed when they stated, "Obviously, students need the skills which have been identified by experienced faculty as those necessary to help them succeed in their academic course work. However, they also need communication skills which will carry over after graduation to ensure success in their chosen professions" (p. 187). Communication educators only minimally agree on what communication skill development programs ought to be part of the basic communication course. Suggesting that public speaking skills, even though the public speaking course remains the most popular basic communication course (55% of basic courses), provide these needed skills is not an adequate conclusion.

The problem remains, we have little if any communication research, beyond opinions of authors or course directors, to document whether students' communication skills develop in appropriate areas as a result of their enrollment in the basic communication course. Seiler and McGukin (1989) stated clearly the exact problem, "Little research, however, has examined the effectiveness of instruction and practice in developing students' competence" (p. 31).

Universities should meet the same challenge by requiring students to take additional oral communication-intensive courses during their undergraduate studies. Communication faculty stand ready to implement a communication across the curriculum program and train faculty interested in enhancing the communication skills of their students.

Research results are clear, directives from accrediting agencies are clear, opinions of business leaders are clear; and they conclude one thing: ***the blend communication course is the most appropriate basic communication course for undergraduate students***. Helping students learn interpersonal, listening, and group communication skills is the clear directive. To settle for anything less is inconsistent with the research data. We need to capitalize on the tradition of the hybrid course and offer students instruction in the communication competencies they need in the blend basic communication course which focuses on group and interpersonal communication.

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